Chapter 16
“You Can Take Out of it What You Want”: How Learning Objects within Blended Learning Designs Encourage Personalised Learning

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ABSTRACT
This chapter shows how a suite of learning objects were developed by the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning for Reusable Learning Objects (www.RLO-CETL.ac.uk), one of 74 CETLs being funded by the UK’s Higher Education Funding Council for England. The learning objects were used to support students within a blended learning context. It shows student personalised learning: learning that can be any time (in the 24 hour digital world), any place (the university experienced in the home or workplace), any where (limited only by the students choice and internet access – trains, boats, planes, global learning). It focuses on two case studies at UK Higher Education institutions that demonstrate any time, any place learning. London Metropolitan University (London Met) and Thames Valley University (TVU), have both used and reused learning objects in different contexts. In each case study the background and the resulting blended learning design is outlined, followed by evaluation data illustrating the student experience and how the learning design and the learning objects have encouraged personalised learning. The chapter concludes with the start of the third iteration of use – to facilitate informal learning ‘any where’, through the incorporation of learning objects that can be used on mobile phones.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the metaphor of any time and any place personalised learning. In its simplest form, personalised learning focuses on the customisation of education to an individual’s needs, interests and aptitude, giving the learner a degree of ownership of the learning process. Such a view has the potential to refocus learning from the student perspective, in addition to the institutional viewpoint of providing appropriate learning environments. Indeed, given the current interest in the student learning experience, for example see the JISC report ‘In their Own words’ (JISC 2007), institutions are increasingly examining PLEs (Personal Learning Environments) as a way to enable any time and any place learning:

The idea of a PLE (Personal Learning Environment) is that learners can configure different services and tools to develop their own learning environment, bringing together informal learning from the home, the workplace as well as more formal provision by education institutions. The PLE is controlled by the learner and as well as offering an environment for accessing different information and knowledge allows access to web based publishing and other opportunities for creating content and expressing and exchanging ideas. The idea behind the PLE is to harness the power and potential of social software and web 2.0 applications for learning. (Atwell, 2008).

However, we contend that from a Higher Education perspective, the whole personal learning agenda needs exploring with formal learning in mind, i.e. where a more deliberative approach to scaffold learning takes place to complement the more informal social activities that may go on using social software. Cook (2009) has argued that we need Personalised Learning Environments, which he defines as a loosely coupled set of tools and resources that are learner defined, i.e. where the learner creates their own context for learning (hence the use of the word Personalised as opposed to Personal). The European Commission funded MATURE project (http://mature-ip.eu/en/start) and the work of Van Harmelen (2007) provides a good example of the development of Personal Learning Environments and tools to support work-based learners on a learning journey. Cook (2009) describes the learner’s perspective within a Personalised Learning Environment, based on his involvement in the MATURE project, as follows. The learner is supported on a learning journey as they: (i) set their own learning goals; manage their learning (by managing both content and process); communicate with others across multiple contexts in the process of learning (i.e. support student experience of eLearning as they move between work/life/learning contexts); appropriate digital tools and media into the learning practice; and thereby achieve learning goals.

But Personalised Learning Environments (or PLEs from now on) are also about imposing the personal on the technical and providing 24/7 access to educational support. Because there is a real need to support more formal education, this paper looks at the work of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) in Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs) and how this work on formal learning has been used to promote personalised learning at two UK Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). These reusable learning objects provide bite-sized scaffolding for learning and can be seen as one of the building blocks for the PLE, which we conceived as a loosely coupled set of tools and resources.

The CETL in Reusable Learning Objects is one of 74 CETLs being funded by the UK’s Higher Education Funding Council for England (http://www.rlo-cetl.ac.uk/). It is developing a range of multimedia learning objects that are stored in repositories, accessed over the Web or from mobile phones, and integrated into course delivery. London Metropolitan University (London Met) is the lead site, in partnership with the Universities of Cambridge and Nottingham. The RLOs
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